

TEACHING TOLERANCE



A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
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Common Beliefs

COMMON BELIEF 1

I don't think of my students in terms of their race or ethnicity.

I am color blind when it comes to my teaching.

Background

When teachers say they are color blind, they are usually saying that they do not discriminate and that they treat all their students equally. Of course, being fair and treating each student with respect are essential to effective teaching. However, race and ethnicity often play important roles on children's identities, and contribute to their culture, their behavior, and their beliefs. When race and ethnicity are ignored, teachers miss opportunities to help students connect with what is being taught. Recognizing that a student's race and ethnicity influences their learning allows teachers to be responsive to individual differences. In some cases, ignoring a student's race and ethnicity may undermine a teacher's ability to understand student behavior and student confidence in doing well in a school culture where expectations and communication are unfamiliar. An individual's race and ethnicity are central to her or his sense of self but they are not the whole of personal identity. Moreover, how important an individual's race and ethnicity is to their identity will vary and teachers need to take that into account as they seek to learn more about their students.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some ways for educators to acknowledge students' ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic identities?
2. Why is it important to incorporate their identities into the curriculum?
3. What happens when teachers don't validate their students' racial and ethnic identities?

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Common Beliefs

COMMON BELIEF 3

Teachers should adapt their instructional practice to the distinctive cultures of African American, Latino, Asian and Native American students.

Background

Teachers who are responsive to their students' values, beliefs and experiences will be more effective than those who are not. Some generalizations can be made about the cultures of different racial and ethnic groups that can help teachers to begin to understand their students. However, these generalizations also can lead to stereotypes and a failure to recognize that within broad racial and ethnic groupings (e.g., Latino and Asian) there are very big average differences related to subgroups (e.g., Chinese Americans and Cambodian Americans) and social class differences within groups. Moreover, even within subgroups and students of similar socioeconomic status, there are often significant differences in the factors that influence student learning. There is no substitute for getting to know each student well and adapting instruction to these realities.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some ways in which teachers can view the cultures of their students without stereotyping them?
2. How might teachers learn about the cultural perspectives and practices of their students?
3. What is culturally relevant pedagogy?

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Common Beliefs

COMMON BELIEF 5

When students come from homes where educational achievement is not a high priority, they often don't do their homework and their parents don't come to school events. This lack of parental support undermines my efforts to teach these students.

Background

When families (not all students live with or are primarily cared for by one or more parents) do not get engaged in supporting their children's learning, the job of the teacher is more difficult. The reasons why families don't get involved are many. They may lack interest, but more often parents cannot get to the school, feel that they lack the knowledge of resources to help, or feel that they do not know what their role should be. This is especially true, of course, for families from some cultures, for those who do not feel comfortable with English and for single parents who may work more than one job and have responsibilities for caring for other children. Schools that support teachers in reaching out to families in several ways, and that see family engagement as a school-wide responsibility, can significantly increase the extent to which families help their children do well in school.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some explanations for why parents avoid coming to their children's school?
2. How can educators invite and encourage the involvement of families?

Common Beliefs

COMMON BELIEF 7

I believe that I should reward students who try hard, even if they are not doing well in school because building their self-esteem is important.

Background

It is certainly true that students who are confident in their ability to do well in school achieve at higher levels than do students with the same ability who lack this sense of efficacy. However, if students come to believe that they are achieving at high levels when they are not, this can lead to a belief that they need not work harder. If they realize that other, less-able students are receiving recognitions similar to theirs, this may lead students to believe that less is expected of them than their classmates. This, of course, is the case—less is being expected and students can take this as evidence that they do not have the ability to achieve at high levels. High self-esteem does not, in itself, translate to high academic performance. But, when high self-esteem is derived from solid performance in school, this contributes to student engagement and effort to improve further.

Question to Consider

1. What do teachers need to keep in mind as they raise the learning expectations for students who are not as confident in their capabilities as learners?

Common Beliefs

COMMON BELIEF 9

Students of different races and ethnicities often have different learning styles and good teachers will match their instruction to these learning styles.

Background

Many teachers have learned that they should take into account the learning styles of their students. But the concept of learning styles has different meanings and much recent research on learning does not talk about learning styles. Among the reasons why many cognitive psychologists discount the importance of learning styles is that this intuitively sensible idea is easily abused. For example, we all prefer to learn in some ways more than others. But this does not mean that our brains function differently when we learn. And, if our preferences are reinforced, we may fail to learn how to learn in other ways. Since we cannot control the demands on us to learn, especially outside of school, being taught in terms of our preferred “learning style” can limit our success in solving problems. Some ways of describing learning styles—such as distinctions between “concrete operationalizing” and “abstract conceptualization” (or “logical-mathematical” and “bodily-kinesthetic”)—implicitly represent a hierarchy of academic learning capabilities. Thus, students not challenged to learn to conceptualize complex phenomena will be disadvantaged in taking on many tasks most highly valued by society and essential to complex problem solving.

Question to Consider

1. What are some ways that educators can have high expectations of their students, while acknowledging their individual needs?